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The Kiss

The seated Walter blinks against the glare let in around the round, dark figure in the doorway. "If you is a shelf-sitter"-- he hears--"then you aint got even a shelf to sit on in this slum!" A draft slams the screen door, knocking Bink into the room. "Hey! Hold on a little minute! Aint that supposed to happen on the way out--according to the ancient expression?"

"Don't let the door hit you in the ass? Well you already did. That's you--always a step ahead."

"Yeah, with my behind!"

"Is this a social call or are you representing Madame?" snickers Walter.

Bink shambles to the filing cabinet and pretends to read from the book on top. "Oh my oh my, *School Law Revisions*. I am mad to come in contact with them!" His white hair flares.

"Sandburg!"

The rotund Bink pages through the thick book. "Whitman, but don't worry. *You aint spose to know nuttin!*" His shirttail pops out as he slams the book shut and gestures wildly with both arms. '*The Rose Valley School District reposes in a region of almost explosive fertility.*' Oh Mama!"

As he is negotiating the irregular wooden floor to plump down on Walter's desk, the light flies in, temporarily blinding him. "Jee-SUS! No window shades even? Who'd you offend?

"Nobody." Walter leans back in his squeaky office chair. "Ever. And I didn't write that Rose Valley thing if anyone did. My stuff's a notch back from purple."

Bink picks up a piece of computer paper, drops it to study the wind currents. "No matter. Nobody on the fifth floor ever reads backgrounders. We call them backgrounders. Oh we feed Madame Secretary a mushy line periodically--keep her happy," he winks, the salt and pepper eyebrows riding up just after.

"I was half expecting her," laughs Walter. "The year's about up. She...visits once a year."

"I got that. At any rate ole buddy," and he reaches across the desk to tap Walter lightly on the arm, "she got a couple dozen Dutch schoolteachers in tow this day. Greeks last week. Whole world comes here to see how we do it!"

"Quite a salary to lead tours.

"I always liked that in you--watching the buck. But she's a short timer-no sexual innuendo--governor said six months left. So! She leads the tours like that eminent scholar who preceded her. Hey, she's not harmless in the office. More she stays out of it, more education in this state got a chance. Slim but some."

"I didn't know about her or..."

Bink throws a paper clip at the ducking Walter. "That's because you're buried in this hole staying pure. Look at those nice pink hands, while mine are black--both literally and in a manner of speaking."

Walter is untwisting the paper clip. "Please, no ethnic humor!"

And here Bink's brow furrows: "There's a final tradeoff for those nice clean hands I'm afraid."

"Sounds ominous."

"It's been in the air. Again, you haven't sniffed."

"Always been in the air since day one here. I...stopped sniffing."

"I'm here announcing your retirement to you. You and Madam and a whole bunch."

Walter shuts his eyes an instant. "Yeah...well..."

The next moment Bink's gray eyes hold him steadily. "I'll be following next year. *Numero Uno*'s to be black guy I went to graduate school with. I break him in and *vamoose*. Dude's about a smart as a rock so he'll be glad to see my ass disappear."

"Should be you."

"Yup--but justice is hiding permanently at the present, and I fought too many discrimination battles against people on the fifth floor. They don't forget and they got friends in both parties.

"Absolutely should be you!"

"Hey! Walter! Don't be so nice. You're getting canned and it's mostly me who's doing it.

Walter waves an arm to dismiss the idea. "It's mostly the kids. That much I know."

"Jackpot! she made us hire that whole seventh floor straight from college, and for one year they've done nothing but smoke funny cigarettes up there, even busted out a window so the green clouds'd drift away to corrode the car finishes in Accounting's parking lot. At any rate I've got to sidestep a legislative investigation by moving them into real jobs and shoving the old folks out thereby."

Walter wheels back, shrugging. "The kiss-off." He leans back against the filing cabinet.

Bink slides slowly off the desk and walks to the screen door. His back to Walter, he tucks in his rumpled shirt, his other hand fluttering through his gray-white hair. "Funny you should say that. Tearful dinner in June for Madame and all you long-tooths. Then, drama!" Bink turns and minces back towards Walter. "She...walksssss...down the line, *kisses* winner of Elizabeth Marriner Skelton Award!"

Walter's head snaps forward and sinks towards his chest.
"Me?"

"Great honor though it buys no Big Macs."

"Those teeth!"

"No beauty and no brains. Support the handicapped."

"The Last Supper." Walter wheels back to the desk to shuffle the papers atop, and Bink turns around slowly and goes to the door, trails of sunlight playing across the bronze screen and outlining his large form again as he revolves to point to Walter. "You selling the Science Eleven module?"

"Trying to.

"I'll write her presentation speech to you around it. Just move *one* of the damn dogs. Two hundred seventy two thousand dollars to develop and not one teacher'll touch it. Don't even try the science directors. It's a joke to them. By the bye, I'm to get the award next year--though not the kiss--so

you'll be in good company in the long run! I picked me."

"Your habitual modesty.

"At first...you're right, but I went from your basic black paper doll with attache case to the worst of this damn white world, its inexhaustible arrogance."

"It comes to us all."

"Yeah it does!"--and Bink gets agitated in the flaring backlight. "But, you know, it's somehow not the...Judas-kiss I think of but *The Kiss* by Chekov. Know that one? Shy officer gets kissed in the dark by mistake, dreams all kinds of wonders about it. Wonders!"

Walter leans forward, the chair creaking extraordinarily slow. "Parallel to me?"

"Us. When we came to the bureau together, ready to romantically and ferociously attack the challenge!--some such *petit bourgeois* language anyway. Like that Russian officer, simple and naive. But...Madame to you: *Kiss of Death* of course!"

"Union?" And Walter's voice in its faintness showed he knew the answer.

"You were a bit of a fighter," Bink shadowboxes, "till about ten years ago. Anyway, the union picks up one trick, Hispanic woman Accounting wants fired for being stereotypically

hysterical. Then the deck gets put away till next contract."

Bink again sits on the desk.

"I'd be playing into a stacked deck then."

"Always," whispers Bink, his hair and eyebrows pure white in the bright wind which ruffles the papers on Walter's desk.

"And everywhere."

And Walter shakes his head more quickly than he had intended. "I'm...gone. I can't get used to it."

"Way it goes. Youth must be served. Or saved, I hope. Come on, walk me out and say goodbye. You might as well stay in this slum. No use putting you on the sixth floor just to fire you. Besides we're moving the kids down there--minus the funny cigarettes." Walter is rising up in rhythm to the creaking spring of his chair. He walks to Bink, consciously spare in his movements.

"What is this slum anyway, Walt?"

"Shack the construction boys left when they finished the building."

"They never finished the building. Madame accepted it in her usual incompetent manner, and they left a mess of boards and wire and mud!" Here Bink pulls a board in the wall, revealing black tar paper underneath before it snaps back. "This place is better built!"

They walk together to the door, stand there in the whipping-around light, the bronze screen vibrant behind their dissimilar outlines. "God I used to love to read," Bink muses. Rilke, Eliot, book in my back pocket always." They stand unmoving and uneasy, as if embarrassed for time.

Suddenly Bink thrusts out his hand but when Walter takes it he pulls him closer and they embrace. "All the others I tell today will try and make me hurt. You're a man of character, Walter. How on earth could you stay here so long?"

To Walter the embrace triggers the memory of a softball game their first year. The two of them committed a rapidfire series of errors to lose the game and then fell into each other's arms laughing, rolling around in the dirt, the other team eventually stopping its jubilation to watch. Their curled lips.

"Look how damn fat I got, Walter, fat and white black man," Bink was saying, is saying as the door slammed, its bronze flash.

What his own mind picks out as he strides the rough floor is the hurt of Bink's "shelf-sitter." And he pictures himself on a high shelf, the ceiling pressing down, bowing his neck like a vulture's. *So this is how fifth floor sees me.* His own designation had been 'troubleshooter,' one who saved limping

programs, had saved many over the years, thirty odd years. He tries to count how many since he knew he was getting the Elizabeth Marriner Skelton Award only for seniority. *It could all have been different but I hate show and that's that!*

Gusts rattle the wooden building and he looks up to see one huge snowflake fling against his window, as quickly start melting in bright rivulets through the grime. He walks to the window to stare at the new building. Snow whips around it in brilliant sunshine but, strangely, none of the black windows reflects back, and he couldn't see where the marijuana smokers had kicked one out--they all look empty.

He all but runs to the phone to dial the next number on the list. "Cohen!" comes sharply back. Walter had heard no ring. He has hardly gotten into the pitch for the Science Module when Dr. Cohen shouts "No! No new programs. Haven't I got trouble enough? Listen to these illiterates." There follows a terrific run of general chatter and laughing and shrieking. "They don't need new programs; they need new parents. Arrowhead School District's full of big homes and small minds."

"We love you Dr. Cohen!"---a squealing chorus.

"Yeah? Well that's a hell of a substitute for the real thing. Now shut up while I talk to Walter Whatever. Hey I'm sorry, Walter Whatever of Education in our otherwise corrupt

capitol, but nothing now has ever been tried here. Hell, these kids think evolution is what some old garbage rock-and-roll record used to do at thirty three and a third.

"I frankly think he's after your body, Verna!"

"Aint everybody?" A general laugh punctuated by whoops. "What you're hearing, Walter, are the erudite processings of the Science Club. If this is the *creme de creme* you can guess the rest." And into tho ensuing silence Walter ventures, "They've grown quiet."

"Picking their noses--what they do for culture here."

"Then go back to Now York then!" In the din of the sporadic *Yeahs* following the men manage to say goodbye."

Pushing back from the desk until the chair rolls into the filing cabinet, Walter sighs, "At least they're alive." He looks up to see larger snowflakes pasted on the window, brightly back-lit by the sun, snow bunching in the screendoor like kleenex. And suddenly, blurred colors and bars of light undulate behind the clusters of snow; Walter gets up and walks to the window. He has to wrench it up to assemble the scene: hundreds of cars, their headlights slicing the soft-falling snow, directional signals blinking amber. Walter knew the false snow the early spring often brings--thick for a half hour or so, and then melting in a bright, watery rush.

He knew that Bink would never have okayed early dismissal, so it was wheedled out of Madame Secretary in the midst of her tour-leading.

Now Head Guard, Mr. Alphonse Benjamin runs to direct traffic, first stopping everything from all directions in order to button up his departmental blazer, the silver buttons looking us large as half dollars through the planes of golden snow, his thoughtful face a glistening black. Abruptly a tomato-colored Hyundai swings out of a line of cars and heads straight for him, only to veer off about fifteen feet away and bounce onto the concrete divider. Benjamin has stood his ground imperiously, and now eases into the ballet sequence once shown on cable television. Soon he has the traffic moving smoothly with his dancing and gesturing, but can't help but reveal some periodic irritation at the car perched on the divider, the driver of which, a very tall girl with long brown and blond cornrows of hair, pops up through the open sunroof and jerkily twists her upturned face to drink the snow. A fat and shirtless young man attempts to staunch this seeming ecstasy by dragging her back down into the car by the legs. Three other baggy young people sit against the car passing around a joint and repeatedly screaming a sort of rap to the streaming cars: "Assholes, middleclass-holes!"--also donating a unanimous finger to Mr.

Alphonso Benjamin. Walter is heading back to his desk when Mr. Benjamin rushes from the corner of his eye directly at the little car. They all jump back inside while somehow managing to unbend the very tall girl and shove her away from the steering wheel.

Soon, Mr. Benjamin is running for his life through ponds of melting snow and, startlingly, into Madame Director of blood-red slack suit and her entourage of astonishingly white Dutch schoolteachers, all skittishly picking their ways over planks bridging seas of semifrozen mud.

She has passed him with a hatchet-like nod, and now the teachers are consolidating behind her in a white-on-white wave which Mr. Alphonse Benjamin, in his distress, takes as a natural affront. As he sinks to his knees in mud, the Hyundai flings past, jeers dopplering back.

Them and not you Walter. Them! Walter slides the window down quietly--as if afraid they *all* would turn on him. He is surprised to note he has been holding his breath.

The phone jolts. "Cohen again. Look. Send me one of the damn things, all right? You heard the racket the alleged science club makes. Any kind of shit to feed them and preserve my sanity."

Walter proves as cool as Mr. Alphonse Benjamin before the

onset of stoned kids and blood-red director and massively white schoolteachers. "Today is Friday." he intones. "Let's say you give me your home address and I drive it up tomorrow."

"There's a mistake. I'm trying to reach Education in the state capital. Anybody conscientious would have been fired.

"Grind slowly down here.

"They'll getcha!"

"Wouldn't be surprised, Dr. Cohen."

And "Wouldn't be surprised" he is singing later while leaning over the extended bottom file drawer, removing the components of the science module, the shiny looseleaf notebook and the boxes of cassettes. "Wouldn't be at all *zoo*-prized!" He piles everything on the floor and slides the drawer in with a foot, still singing but in a mostly scat style where the words are not recognizable but an abstract little game of sounds.

"Zoo zep zek zoop," he whispers, snapping his fingers before bending down to give the drawer, still stuck out a half inch, a good shove with his hands.

But then, in straightening up, he gets dizzy, black blotches migrating around the room. Walter falls forward an instant, his hands rocking the metal cabinet into the wall, the cabinet bouncing back to barely touch his lips, sharply, electrically. The window streams water; every interstice of the

screendoor bulges with water.

The wet smell revives him:

- 1) whirling to clump down to his knees
- 2) arrange the components in proper order
- 3) galvanic feeling lingering on his lips
- 4) silver pen and a notebook from his breastpocket.

FROM THE DESK OF WALTER DARREN LOVE

Dr. C.-

*Many thanks again and it'll work for you--
guaranteed. One note: tape leaders are long
in case you want to record your own intros.*

If not, start around ten on counter.

Slides the note under the clip already on the front of the teacher's manual and then gazes, still kneeling, at the flooded gold and purple window, the iridescent spinning off his pen. Walter Darren Love, of Education, of lips still scintillant, sighs.

